

Christian Education and the Church Crisis

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William Ralph Inge, distinguished British churchman and author, earned a reputation for a somewhat brooding and dismal outlook on life, possibly because of the impact of his realistic assessment of religious and moral problems of the mid-twentieth century in his volume, *The End of an Age*. A visitor to St. Pauls, aware of his dreary foreboding for the future, commented to the custodian who was serving as guide, "I hear that Dean Inge is quite a pessimist." After a moment of surprised silence the guide gathered his wits, replying, "Pessimist? Oh no sor, 'e's no pessimist, 'e's just ha sad hoptimist!"

This resourceful phrase rather well describes the one who today officially assumes the responsibility for directing that part of the Seminary curriculum devoted to Christian Education. After hearing Dr. McPheeter's stirring sermon at the opening chapel of the academic year, I voice a hearty "Amen" to his confidence that our God still rules over the affairs and destinies of men, and that He will, at the proper time, assert His full sovereign authority, putting to confusion the vanities of man and destroying the malignant influences of Satan. I have every confidence that the One to whom I give my highest allegiance will yet see His enemies groveling at His feet, blinded by the blazing glory of His holy presence, pleading for the consideration and mercy which they cannot then receive. I shall see them, doomed by their own moral anarchy, self-preoccupation and sin, hurtling through untracked regions of night to the outer darkness to which they have been forever consigned, while my heavenly Father reigns over the universe He created; a cleansed, renovated and renewed creation, suitable for residences of the redeemed. This faith that God's original design will be rescued and fulfilled earns for me the sobriquet, "optimist."

This does not alter the fact that I am a sad optimist, sad because the battle which is destined to a final right outcome is

now going so badly; and because the temporary reverses, if one can calmly so describe them, are costing the immortal souls of unknown millions of the sons of men. My highest hopes for the future cannot lift me above the dull despair of the present when I contemplate the awful price being paid for centuries of ineffective Christian effort, of careless and blundering management of Christ's great commission.

I am sad about our humiliating failure at the point of growth. At a time when the population is expanding so rapidly that sociologists describe the phenomenon as an explosion, the advances of the Church are distressingly unimpressive. Let's look at the very latest figures, rounded off into even millions. The last census year revealed an astonishing increase in religious population--all sorts of religions--of one hundred million. In this upsurge, how did Christianity fare? *All* the Christian bodies, Protestant and Catholic, Roman and orthodox, denominations and sects, liberal and conservative, gained twenty-one million members. Protestants, all Protestants, mind you, not just those evangelically oriented, gained only three million. This may not sound too serious until one projects it ten years into the future. Unless the present trend is somehow reversed, by that time, when our present students are still young men not yet in their ministerial primes, there will be in the world over 780 million more non-Christians than there now are. There will be 970 million more non-Protestants than in this year. When the pitiful three per cent that Protestantism is able to salvage out of the total population increase is analyzed, how much smaller is the number in the true experience of spiritual rebirth, in vital possession of Christ as Redeeming Lord!

Dr. Clarence H. Benson, a respected authority in the field of Christian Education, deplored the fact that Christianity in its first five centuries failed to invade Africa with the Gospel, enabling Mohammedanism to drive its roots into the soil of that great continent, later to spread like a malignancy until it was finally stopped at Tours. It is harder to explain why, with the multiplied resources of the Church to spread the Gospel, last year Moslem growth in the world exceeded that of Protestant Christianity by two million people, or why Hinduism matched Protestant increase, or why Shintoism multiplied it by six! If the early Church failed, how much more tragic is the missionary ineptness of the contemporary Church!

Even in America alone the picture remains dreary. Protestantism is barely able to match population expansion, and that is no way to reach a generation already steeped in materialism and so saturated with sensualism that Professor Pitirim Sorokin dubbed it a "sensate civilization."

I am sad about the moral and spiritual degeneration of our age. It would seem that a nation nominally committed to Christian principles, a nation, in fact, in whose cultural soil Christianity is better off than elsewhere on our planet, could give to the world a more worthy image of religion than our people manage with their preoccupation about profit and their passion for pleasure. Our annual crime bill is the reproach of the civilized world. Skyrocketing divorce statistics, delinquency of juveniles and their parents, profligate waste so vividly described by Vance Packard, shameless and tasteless ostentation, cultural deterioration, and above all else our colossal religious indifference, paint a picture of applied Christianity that is hideously unattractive. Even our charities are performed with a patronizing air that causes the beneficiaries of our largesse to despise us while accepting our doles. As a nation we advertise our lack of humility, a basic element of Christ-likeness. It would seem that the Church *should* and *could* have more powerfully influenced its environment than it has.

Let me hurriedly admit that this is not entirely a sad tale of compromise and cheapened standards. The Church simply does not get to the non-Christian portion of the society it serves with its message. It wants to and in many ways tries to. These ways deserve friendly but careful scrutiny.

For over nineteen hundred years the Church has been attempting to transform the world by preaching. Christ enjoined His followers to preach and the Scriptures confirm preaching as a redemptive instrument. I would not and I cannot belittle it. The problem, however, is plain. Preaching simply does not reach those who do not hear it. Every Sunday clear gospel truth is proclaimed to unknown millions of empty seats. The problem of the Church is to fill those seats! After they are filled, preaching must improve, or their occupants will be soon gone. Training for excellence in delivery and wealth of content is an imperative, but preaching alone is unable to attract the unreached.

Mass evangelism is another well-explored approach. Having devoted some years of my life to the work of a vocational evangelist, I hold the profession in high regard, commending those whom God uses to reach the lost through evangelism. Billy Graham is certainly the most effective evangelist of our day--and perhaps any other day--in reaching large numbers of people with the Gospel and bringing them to an hour of decision. Yet to meet the demands of an expanding population alone, to say nothing of invading the ranks of the now unsaved, would take eight hundred Grahams--and their teams--working at the same level of efficiency, with the same dedication, and with a similar public acceptance. We simply don't have eight hundred more Grahams, each with a George Beverly Shea, a Cliff Barrows, and a huge corps of skilled and competent colleagues. We don't have eight more, or even one more. This takes nothing away from Billy Graham, whose work stands on its own merit, and who symbolizes the evangelistic approach, which should be more than sustained, it should be accelerated. I pray for the day when men--alumni of Asbury Theological Seminary, I trust--will exalt the message of full salvation from all sin as Billy Graham does the message of regeneration and rebirth. The thing I would make clear is that on today's horizon there is no one even approaching the outreach of America's best-known evangelist, and we need hundreds like him if the world is to be reached by evangelism.

The Church has tried promotion and program. Both have heightened interest temporarily when intelligently applied, but have almost always receded when the dominant personality back of them is transferred elsewhere. The same thing can be said of vigorous administrative procedures that put to work large numbers of lay persons, creating a healthy organization that is inviting to outsiders.

The Church has tried the approach of constructive scholarship, utilizing the printed page and the spoken word. Reverent and careful exegesis has unfolded splendid truths from their depositories in the pages of sacred writ. But this method suffers from the same handicap that afflicts excellent preaching, to wit, that it can do nothing for those who do not read or hear the words of exposition and explanation.

The method of personal evangelism has been very seriously attempted. This enjoys Jesus' personal endorsement and

follows His example. Applied with intelligence, dedication, and unsparing effort, it may very well get the job done. True, it hasn't done so to the present hour, but that is largely because most people would rather contribute to the church and have a professional do their witnessing and soul winning. Individual outreach is Christ's primary program for seeking and saving the lost, and when each Christian takes it seriously, abandoning his contoured chair and wrenching himself from the nightly session with the television screen to go out into the byways and hedges with the compulsion of Christ on him, Christianity will be on the move. Personal evangelism has failed only because there are entirely too few selfless souls who have a real burden for the lost that makes them indifferent to inconvenience and sacrifice. A lethargic and self-centered people will never produce personal evangelists in the number required to reach the milling millions of lost souls and lost lives.

You will recognize that I have been describing not only facets of the Church's efforts in the direction of filling empty pews, but phases of the Seminary curricular program. Not one has been disparaged. All are necessary. To their continued success in the highest traditions of this splendid Seminary I am completely committed. However, I believe with an almost fierce intensity that something more is needed as an instrument of recruitment and evangelism, and that something is the educational program of the Church. The single encouraging ray of light breaking through the drab picture I drew a few minutes ago is that of the Sunday church school. It *is* growing, making progress last year at a rate four times as great as the population increase. In spite of too little time, mediocre equipment, much substandard material, ill-trained teachers and ministers with little specialized educational background to properly qualify them as leaders in learning, the schools of the Church showed significant gains. With improved programs and more adequately equipped ministers to blaze new trails, the tide of defeat can be reversed, and hope can replace the mood of despair that makes wreckage of the morale of many church groups.

Is this a mirage on the ecclesiastical horizon, the dream of an educator who has some pardonable enthusiasm for his chosen field? Well, let's look at the facts. In the dreary record of mediocre accomplishments on the part of American

Protestantism in general, there are some very bright passages. A few--true, a very few, but still a few--denominations have lifted the membership from the debit to the credit side of the ledger by some highly creditable, even spectacular, growth performances. It would probably be in poor taste to mention them, for the omission of some denominational names would be embarrassing, but the record is there for any one who cares to spend five minutes in our library. The important fact for all of us is that every one of these growing denominations has an aggressive, splendidly administered and resourcefully planned educational program, implemented with Bible-centered instructional materials and reinforced by a continuing plan of teacher and teaching improvement. We would be guilty of unpardonable shallowness if we were to waste time either criticizing or envying those who are setting new standards in successful outreach. Rather, I would learn their secrets and share them with those whom I instruct. The task is so great, the time so short, that we dare not dissipate our energies in following lines of endeavor that have been proved unproductive. Right now, American evangelicals have the tools, the examples, and the incentives for doing a smart about-face, turning withdrawal into a full-line advance, proving our mettle as good soldiers of the Cross, and taking new territory in the name of our Saviour and Redeeming Lord, Jesus Christ.

Before I go any further, permit me to accent one influence of the Sunday School, probably the most important single part of the educational arm of the Church, that is well established. Years ago Ben Lindsey, juvenile court judge in Denver, noted that almost no young offenders were before him who had been regular attendants at Sunday School. Subsequent studies have verified Judge Lindsey's observation, to the point of arriving at a mathematical formula. Ninety-eight per cent of all juvenile delinquents are quite without Sunday School training. This means just one thing: delinquency, with its appalling cost in money, life and character, could be stopped in its tracks if we could devise some way of getting one hundred per cent of American children into, and keeping them in, Sunday Schools. This is much more difficult than it sounds, for it requires gaining the cooperation of many parents who are simply not concerned. If it *could* be accomplished, our levels of national decency would be spectacularly raised in a very few years. Fortunately, many children can be interested even when their

parents are occupied with whiling away hours in clubs and taverns, ignoring the responsibilities of being good fathers and mothers. We simply must not cross off as unreachable those children whose parents are morally stupid and religiously disinterested. Our whole national future, as well as their destiny, is at stake in reaching them before time runs out. It is no slur on scholarly effort to state plainly that a minister has a distorted sense of values who will surround himself in his study with preaching aids so he can produce impressive sermons calculated to make his people purr over him as they leave the sanctuary, while remaining unaware of the needs of children in his parish who may so easily become involved in mischief that will bring grief to the community and loss to their own souls. With the unmistakably clear record of the success of the Sunday School in producing the kind of character that can resist the tugs of degrading influences, it is a solemn responsibility for every minister to equip himself as carefully and thoroughly for the educational task of the Church as for any other phase of his professional service. It must be said to the everlasting shame of theological education in America that for decades it was assumed that educational leadership required no special training, being a sort of do-it-yourself project with all the necessary skills picked up along the way. Thank God the seminaries are outgrowing this attitude! The importance of the educational aspect of the church program is now clear, and men are being now trained who know what to do and how to do it when a more aggressive and effective Church School is needed.

You would suffer a double disappointment if I were to conclude on a sombre note, because I would apparently see no hope for the future of our faith and the Church, and because I would give you no clue as to the definite things we expect to accomplish at Asbury Theological Seminary. I do have hope and we do have a program.

First, we propose to teach people how to teach people how to teach. This may sound involved, but it is precisely what is needed. There is no more crying, more desperate need in the educational program of the Church today than for improvement in teaching. Instructional procedures have been so shabby that those who attended as a result of discipline or duty were bored. When attendance was given an occasional thrust by promotional devices, it soon drifted back to the

same unsatisfactory levels because those who came found it scarcely worth their while to return regularly. There is one way and only one way to really build and hold attendance, and that is to give those who come something to stimulate their thinking and nourish their souls. Since a complete corps of highly trained teachers is not immediately available, the Church has one practical recourse, to train those now in service to be better teachers. If we at Asbury Theological Seminary train teachers who only teach, we reach dozens. If they train others how to teach, we reach thousands. This we will do.

Secondly, we expect to graduate people who are subject-matter specialists. Good teaching methods are scarcely enough, for excellent instruction must be high in content. Education has been charged for decades with being more concerned with knowing *how* to teach than in having something to teach. We will not make this mistake at Asbury Theological Seminary. Examine our curriculum. It is content rich and will so remain. As our training is applied to the schools of the Church, we expect to utilize content for the enrichment of individual experience, and in a Bible-centered yet experience-aware program of studies deal with human needs at a thoroughly practical level. We believe in a personally and socially applied Christianity.

In the third place, we will send into fields of service ministers and directors of Christian Education who are thoroughly acquainted with the educational structure and program of the Church, and who know how to administer it. They will know how to supervise, evaluate, and contribute constructively to procedures for improvement.

In the fourth place, we hope that we will be able to so train students that they will be skilled in human relationships. This means that they must understand people, their development, their interests, their problems, their behavior. Wise and tactful counseling is necessary to help people resolve their emotional conflicts in these disturbing days. With perfect love in their hearts and compassionate concern demonstrated in their social contacts, our graduates will serve effectively as good ministers of Jesus Christ.

In the fifth place, we will instruct our students in the best established, most workable devices for recruitment. The unchurched must be reached, the lost must be saved, and we

pray that no alumnus of this God-honored school will dishonor his alma mater by settling into a snug little routine that will bring only material comforts and security. Christ was a man of restlessness, as well as one of rest, and we will do our best to prepare men and women to follow in His steps, rich in compassion, urgent in compulsion.

Finally, we pledge ourselves to exalt the educational work of the Church as an instrument of evangelism. Eight out of ten members of the Church come through the avenue of the Church School, and we are vitally concerned that these shall come into membership of the body of Christ with a certain and known experience of spiritual rebirth. At Asbury Theological Seminary we do not hold to the cheerful but unrealistic notion that all children are congenitally good, needing only a favorable environment to cultivate that bent to righteousness. We know better! We do not, however, believe that a person needs to be sin-saturated in order to properly appreciate his salvation. Like the Christ whom we serve, in whose steps we walk, we want the *little* children to come, before strong bands of sinful habit are forged about them which are ever more difficult to loose. We want them to early know the peace and confidence born of the certainty of sins forgiven. Our teachers in the schools of the Church need to be morally and spiritually qualified, as well as possessing skills for leading children--and adults--to Christ. With church revivals poorly attended by all but those already in the faith, with personal evangelism too often a mere membership drive, the Church schools remain the last effective bulwark for a dynamic and fruitful evangelism. If they fail, I confess that I do not know where to turn, but they do not need to fail. Not only the Church of tomorrow, but the records of eternity are in the hands of the Church schools of today--the Sunday School, the Vacation Bible School, the membership training class, the leadership training school, released time instruction--instruments that are God-given, experience-confirmed, and Christ-commissioned to carry on His work, heralding the message of redeeming love.

The thought of failure must not be entertained. We must win! And win we can, armed with the whole armor of God, armed from head to foot, from a knowledge of salvation to a message of peace, defended by faith as a shield, holding a sharp and strong weapon, the Word of God. We must and we

can brace ourselves against every tide of adversity, we can repel every advance of the enemy of the souls of men, we can turn the humiliation of retreat into the glory of advance as we take captive for Christ those who are now the bondservants of Satan. Ours is the call to set men free. To the right response to that call we are committed with head and heart, strength and devotion. From the halls of Asbury Theological Seminary there shall march an army of young men and women, strong and resourceful, dedicated, disciplined, and obedient. Under the white banner of Holiness, they are youth under orders. We are proud of those who have gone, we have every confidence in those who are now in training, we will welcome those yet to come, as the work of Christ goes on and on. Watching them work and pray, preach and teach, we forget our apprehensions, our sadness dissolves, and we gladly surrender to the unmixed optimism that is the birthright of a Christian:

The kingdom is coming, Oh tell ye the story,
God's banner exalted shall be.

The earth shall be full of His knowledge and glory
As waters that cover the sea.